University of Hamburger

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Michael Wilding
ACADEMIA NUTS
Wild & Woolley, $26.95pb, 237pp, 0 909331 94 4

HENRY LANCASTER LECTURES in English. Like Michael Wilding himself, Henry is a practitioner as well as a scholar and teacher. Henry considers expanding his repertoire to include a campus novel. Voicing ‘the now outlawed traditional campus novelists’ foreplay’, Henry finds the university too painful to describe: ‘He tried everything. He tried the postmodern and wrote about being unable to write about it … enough pages. For a postmodern novel.’ While many readers will share Henry’s frustration, some will seek relief by classifying Academia Nuts as meta-narrative rather than as just another campus novel.

As the traditional academic verities disappear, Henry’s pain increases. Henry and several colleagues become disaffected, offering cynical explanations for the new order and bizarre justifications for their own accommodations. They construct conspiracy theories over long lunches.

As the immediate, shiny and new are exalted, thoroughness, experience and institutional memory disappear. Senior academics are hounded from the rapidly developing hamburger university staffed by ‘ignorant smiling teenagers’. Now a year’s leave is available only for special cases: ‘Women. Administrators. Staff who’ve never published anything at all.’ Such is the perversion of educational values that the quickest way to clear a staffroom is to mention a book. Compulsory literary theory courses have given every-thing, verbal or not, the status of ‘text’. Literature is élitist. Books are entombed in the library. If the university is not dead, it is certainly sick, and only senior managers are immune from the disease.

The academics engage in hollow conversations. As they refuse to engage with literal meanings, their flippant dialogue debases the language with wit, puns and sarcasm. Some readers might find this amusing in parts. Others will think it immune from the disease. With sparse characters and little plot development, Wilding treads a fine line between the skilfully absurd and the banal. Perhaps self-parody saves Academia Nuts from seeming derivative and clichéd. The British campus novels of David Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury, Tom Sharpe and Howard Jacobson are difficult acts to follow.

The ‘austlit.edu.au’ database lists more than thirty campus novels. Many are crime or romance fiction set around universities. In the late 1970s Don Aitkin’s The Second Chair explored the contradiction between academic freedom and the expectations of the political authorities controlling the purse strings. More recent works, such as Ross Fitzgerald’s Pushed from the Wings and Laurie Clancy’s Wildlife Reserve, show typical Australian irreverence towards élite education. Perhaps because these are more brazenly satirical than the more gently ironic British variety, Academia Nuts seems only partly successful at parodying the genre.

On the cover, David Williamson praises Wilding’s latest work. Covers are part of the text these days, just as the audience is part of modern theatre. Wilding and Williamson are adornments to the Australian literary world, but their recent works make criticism difficult. By making critics, reviewers and writers characters in Soulmates, Williamson contained likely criticisms within his play. At the climax, characters become members of the audience at a literary festival. External critics are sidelined and made to seem unobservant. By making Lancaster a novelist within the novel, Wilding anticipates criticism and prevents readers from judging Academia Nuts according to normal criteria. This approach does not provide easy entertainment.

Such devices are legitimate. Otherwise, the world of writers and writing that novelists and dramatists inhabit and know best could never be written about. Indeed, only writers at the peak of their powers understand their activity so clearly that they can describe it intelligently. Writers are not spared by Wilding. While all women are treated as interlopers on the campus, writer-in-residence Francesca Templar is depicted particularly unsympathetically.

The working environment of Academia Nuts creates monsters. When Freud ruled the quad, students flirted with knowledge. Now that Orwell, Kafka, fascists and dry supply-side economists dominate, students purchase information and degrees. As part of the dispassionate system, universities cannot expose the great contradictions of the age such as the state’s claim that infringements of human rights are necessary to protect liberty.

Wilding’s characters rage against mediocrity, but their speeches are embarrassingly didactic. Insiders might understand what Henry/Wilding means by ‘All was the solipsistic negation of the deus absconditus’; others might well be baffled. As the university develops ‘an ingrained hostility to the creative’, especially ‘living literature’, it becomes little more than a theme park for setting works of other genres. Henry was ‘asking himself novelists’ questions’, but there were no ‘novelists’ answers’. Paradoxically, Academia Nuts demonstrates the death of the campus novel.